Bruce Coville

Author of the Unicorn Chronicles

Homeward Bound

and Other Unicorns Stories

Praise for The Unicorn Chronicles

“Briskly paced, emotionally moving, and featuring compelling female characters, this traditional fantasy will leave listeners longing for the next book in the series.”
—*School Library Journal*

“A popular subject and author, plus intriguing characters, combine with a good chase plot to make a galloping good beginning to The Unicorn Chronicles. Coville’s fans, unicorn lovers, and fantasy readers will all be pleased.”
—*VOYA*

“Coville propels his multiple plotlines to a riveting cliff-hanging conclusion.”
—*Booklist*

“[Readers] will be swept along to the grand, hard-fought resolution.”
—*Kirkus*

Selected Titles by Bruce Coville

The Unicorn Chronicles

Into the Land of the Unicorns (1994)

Song of the Wanderer (1999)

Dark Whispers (2008)

The Last Hunt (2010)

My Teacher Is an Alien

My Teacher Is an Alien (1989)

My Teacher Fried My Brains (1991)

My Teacher Glows in the Dark (1991)

My Teacher Flunked the Planet (1992)

Magic Shop Books

The Monster's Ring (1989)

Jeremy Thatcher, Dragon Hatcher (1990)

Aladdin (1992)

Jennifer Murdley's Toad (1993)

The Skull of Truth (1999)

Juliet Dove, Queen of Love (2003)

Shakespeare Retellings

The Tempest

A Midsummer Night's Dream

Macbeth

Romeo and Juliet

Hamlet

Twelfth Night

The Winter's Tale

Anthologies

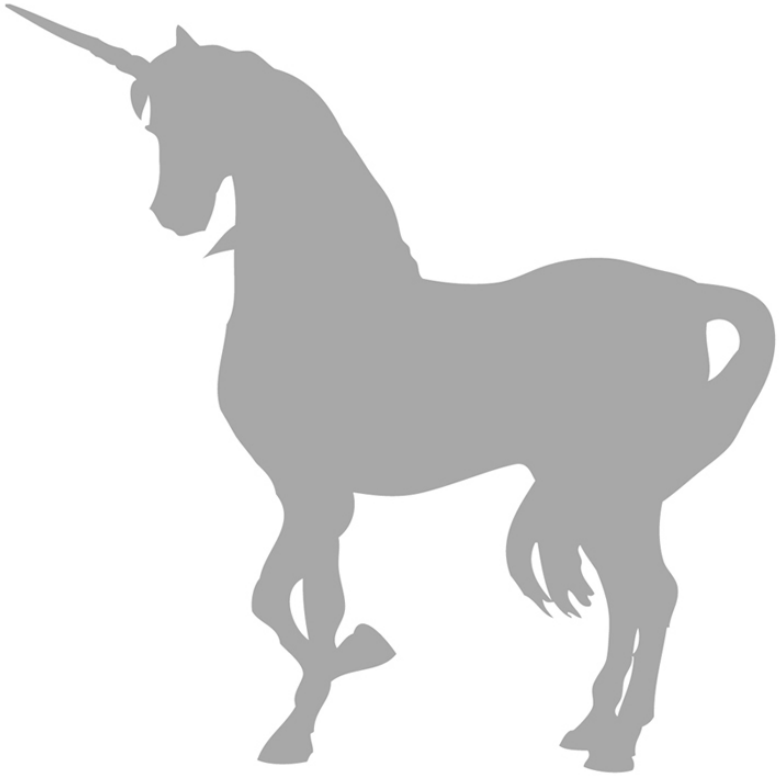
A Glory of Unicorns (1998)

The Unicorn Treasury (1991)

Oddly Enough (1994)

Odder Than Ever (1999)
Odds Are Good (2006)
Oddest of All (2008)

BRUCE COVILLE



HOMEWARD BOUND

AND OTHER UNICORN STORIES

TACHYON
SAN FRANCISCO

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For more information about the author and his works, please visit
http://www.brucecoville.com/.

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INTRODUCTION

SO, here's how the unicorn thing started for me.

In 1977 my wife, illustrator Katherine Coville, and I had sold our first picture book. Filled with youthful exuberance, I wrote a follow-up book called *Space Brat*, which we sent to our editor.

She rejected it, saying "I don't think children will be interested in a noseless green humanoid from outer space" (five years before the noseless brown *E.T.* became one of the biggest money-making films of all time) and, even better, "Besides, I don't think this *Star Wars* craze is going to last."

Sitting around bemoaning this rejection, my wife said to me, "Write me a story about a boy and a unicorn."

Well, I loved unicorns, of course. Who, having read *The Last Unicorn*, could not? Though I did point out that unicorns primarily come to females in the wood. Regardless of that, the next morning I sat down and wrote the first draft of what became *Sarah's Unicorn*. Which we duly sent to the same editor . . . who promptly turned it down, saying, "There are too many books about unicorns. Focus on the girl and the witch instead."

Now, it is well known that it is a mug's game to try to convince an editor that a rejection is mistaken. But in this case the rejection wasn't a matter of opinion about the quality of the book—it was a matter of having the facts wrong. At that point the culture was indeed rife with unicorn posters, stickers, coffee mugs, and (probably) toilet paper. But as far as I have been able to determine, there were no unicorn picture books at all. So I wrote back asking her to take another look, saying, "I can pretty much walk into the library, close my eyes, and put my hand on a picture book about a little girl and a witch. But there just aren't any picture books about unicorns."

Which is the root of how I became, in children's literature, the unicorn guy.

Some years later, I was working with an editor at Doubleday, who told me she had long been wanting to put together an anthology of unicorn stories and thought I would be the right guy to edit it. I heartily agreed and

started work on the project. Her original intent was that it would be a collection of previously printed stories and poems, but after some research, I convinced her that there was a dearth of that material, and we should make it a mix of previously published and original material. Happily, she agreed.

I researched the bejeezus out of unicorns at that point and as a result, one night when I was sitting alone in a restaurant prior to a speaking gig the next day, poured out “Ragged John.” The research also led to my writing “Homeward Bound.” I was just filled to the brim with unicorn material!

That anthology was one of the things that led Scholastic to invite me to create the four-book series that became “The Unicorn Chronicles.” I had no idea when I started what this project would lead to. The original contract was for a three-book series, a book a year, of somewhere between 150 and 200 pages. As it turned out, it took me 16 years to complete it (for a while, I was in danger of becoming the George R. R. Martin of children’s books), and the third volume became a thousand-page opus that had to be split in two in order to be published.

Unicorns will do that to you.

Two of the stories included here—“The Guardian of Memory” and “The Boy with Silver Eyes”—are offshoots from that series, the latter first written to perform with the Syracuse Symphony.

So, why this obsession with unicorns?

Well, the truth is, I have loved the idea of unicorns for as long as I can remember, imagined them, dreamed of glimpsing one, or, even better, befriending it.

I know, too, that I am not alone in this, since wherever I go, I meet fellow unicorn lovers.

But why is this so? Why do so many of us yearn for unicorns?

My guess is that we seek them not merely for their beauty, even though they are more than beautiful enough. I think they call to our hearts so strongly because they represent something sadly lost; their very presence sings of the ancient wonder pervading the natural world, a sense of wonder hard to hold in these modern times.

So, until I actually get to meet one, I will keep writing about them. It’s the next best thing.

—Bruce Coville

HOMEWARD BOUND

JAMIE stood on the steps of his uncle's house and looked up. The place was tall and bleak. With its windows closed and shuttered, as they were now, it was easy to imagine the building was actually trying to keep him out.

"This isn't home," he thought rebelliously. "It's not home, and it never will be."

A pigeon fluttered onto the lawn nearby. Jamie started, then frowned. His father had raised homing pigeons, and the two of them had spent many happy hours together, tending his flock. The sight of the bird now, with the loss of his father still so fresh in his mind, only stirred up memories he wasn't ready to deal with yet.

He looked at the house again and was struck by an odd feeling: while this wasn't home, coming here had somehow taken him one step closer to finding it. That feeling had to do with the horn, of course; of that much he was certain.

Jamie was seven the first time he had seen the horn hanging on the wall of his uncle's study.

"Narwhal," said his uncle, following the boy's gaze." It's a whale with a horn growing out of the front of its head." He put one hand to his forehead and thrust out a finger to illustrate, as if Jamie were some sort of an idiot. "Sort of a sea-going unicorn," he continued. "Except, of course, that it's real instead of imaginary. I'd rather you didn't touch it. I paid dearly to get it."

Jamie had stepped back behind his father without speaking. He didn't dare say what was on his mind. Grown-ups, especially his uncle, didn't like being told they were wrong.

But his uncle *was* wrong. The horn had not come from a narwhal, not come from the sea at all.

It was the horn of a genuine unicorn.

Jamie couldn’t have explained how he knew this was so. But he did, as surely—and mysteriously—as his father’s pigeons knew their way home. Thinking of that moment of certainty now, he was reminded of those stormy nights when he and his father had watched lightning crackle through the summer sky. For an instant, everything would be outlined in light. Then, just as quickly, the world would be plunged back into darkness, with nothing remaining but a dazzling memory.

That was how it had been with the horn, five years ago.

And now Jamie was twelve, and his father was dead, and he had been sent to live with this rich, remote man who had always frightened him so much.

Oddly, that fear didn’t come from his uncle. Despite his stern manner, the man was always quiet and polite with Jamie. Rather he had learned it from his father. The men had not been together often, for his uncle frequently disappeared on mysterious “business trips” lasting weeks or even months on end. But as he watched his father grow nervous and unhappy whenever his brother returned, Jamie came to sense that the one man had a strange hold over the other.

It frightened him.

Yet as scared as he was, as sad and lonely over the death of his father, one small corner of his soul was burning now with a fierce joy, because he was finally going to be close to the horn.

Of course, in a way, he had never been apart from it. Ever since that first sight, five years ago, the horn had shimmered in his memory. It was the first thing he thought of when he woke up, and the last at night when he went to sleep. It was a gleaming beacon in his dreams, reassuring him no matter how cruel and ugly a day might have been, there was a reason to go on, a reason to be. His one glimpse of the horn had filled him with a sense of beauty and rightness so powerful it had carried him through these five years.

Even now, while his uncle was droning on about the household rules, he saw it again in that space in the back of his head where it seemed to reside. Like a shaft of neverending light, it tapered through the darkness of his mind, wrist thick at its base, ice-pick sharp at its tip, a spiraled wonder of icy, pearly whiteness. And while Jamie’s uncle was telling him the study

was off-limits, Jamie was trying to figure out how quickly he could slip in there to see the horn again.

For once again his uncle was wrong. No place that held the horn could be off-limits for him. It was too deeply a part of him.

That was why he had come here so willingly, despite his fear of his uncle. Like the pigeons, he was making his way home.

Jamie listened to the big clock downstairs as it marked off the quarter hours. When the house had been quiet for seventy-five minutes he took the flashlight from under his pillow, climbed out of bed and slipped on his robe. Walking softly, he made his way down the hall, enjoying the feel of the thick carpet like moss beneath his feet.

He paused at the door of the study. Despite his feelings, he hesitated. What would his uncle say, or do, if he woke and caught him here?

The truth was, it didn't matter. He had no choice. He had to see the horn again.

Turning the knob of the door, he held his breath against the inevitable click. When it came, it was mercifully soft. He stepped inside, and flicked on his flashlight.

His heart lurched as the beam struck the opposite wall and showed an empty place where the horn had once hung. A little cry slipped through his lips before he remembered how important it was to remain silent.

He swung the light around the room, and breathed a sigh of relief. The horn, the alicorn, as his reading had told him it was called, lay across his uncle's desk.

He stepped forward, almost unable to believe that the moment he had dreamed of all these years was finally at hand.

He took another step, and another.

He was beside the desk now, close enough to reach out and touch the horn.

And still he hesitated.

Part of that hesitation came from wonder, for the horn was even more beautiful than he had remembered. Another part of it came from a desire to make this moment last as long as he possibly could. It was something he had been living toward for five years now, and he wanted to savor it. But

the biggest part of his hesitation came from fear. He had a sense that once he had touched the horn, his life might never be the same again.

That didn't mean he wouldn't do it.

But he needed to prepare himself. So for a while he simply stood in the darkness, gazing at the horn. Light seemed to play beneath its surface, as if there was something alive inside it—though how that could be after all this time he didn't know.

Finally he reached out to stroke the horn. Just stroke it. He wasn't ready, yet, to truly embrace whatever mystery was waiting for him. Just a hint, just a teasing glimpse, was all he wanted.

His fingertip grazed the horn and he cried out in terror as the room lights blazed on, and his uncle's powerful voice thundered over him, demanding to know what was going on.

Jamie collapsed beside the desk. His uncle scooped him up and carried him back to his room.

A fever set in, and it was three days before Jamie got out of bed again.

He had vague memories of people coming to see him during that time—of a doctor who took his pulse and temperature; of an older woman who hovered beside him, spooning a thin broth between his lips and wiping his forehead with a cool cloth; and most of all, of his uncle, who loomed over his bed like a thundercloud, glowering down at him.

His only other memories were of the strange dream that gripped him over and over again, causing him to thrash and cry out in terror. In the dream he was running through a deep forest. Something was behind him, pursuing him. He leapt over mossy logs, splashed through cold streams, crashed through brambles and thickets. But no matter how he tried, he couldn't escape the fierce thing that was after him—a thing that wore his uncle's face.

More than once Jamie sat up in bed, gasping and covered with sweat. Then the old woman, or the doctor, would speak soothing words and try to calm his fears.

Once he woke quietly. He could hear doves cooing outside his window. Looking up, he saw his uncle standing beside the bed, staring down at him angrily.

"Why?" wondered Jamie. "Why doesn't he want me to touch the horn?"

But he was tired, and the question faded as he slipped back into his dreams.

He was sent away to a school, where he was vaguely miserable but functioned well enough to keep the faculty at a comfortable distance. The other students, not so easily escaped, took some delight in trying to torment the dreamy boy who was so oblivious to their little world of studies and games, their private wars and rages. After a while they gave it up; Jamie didn't react enough to make their tortures worth the effort on any but the most boring of days.

He had other things to think about, memories and mysteries that absorbed him and carried him through the year, aware of the world around him only enough to move from one place to another, to answer questions, to keep people away.

The memories had two sources. The first was the vision that had momentarily dazzled him when he touched the horn, a tantalizing instant of joy so deep and powerful it had shaken him to the roots of his being. Hints of green, of cool, of wind in face and hair whispered at the edges of that vision.

He longed to experience it again.

The other memories echoed from his fever dreams, and were not so pleasant. They spoke only of fear, and some terrible loss he did not understand.

Christmas, when it finally came, was difficult. As the other boys were leaving for home, his uncle sent word that urgent business would keep him out of town throughout the holiday. He paid the headmaster handsomely to keep an eye on Jamie, and feed him Christmas dinner.

The boy spent a bleak holiday longing for his father. Until now his obsession with the horn had shielded him from the still raw pain of that loss. But the sounds and smells of the holiday, the tinkling bells, the warm spices, the temporary but real good will surrounding him, all stirred the sorrow inside him, and he wept himself to sleep at night.

He would dream. In his dreams his father would reach out to take his hand. "We're all lost," he would whisper, as he had the day he died. "Lost, and aching to find our name, so that we can finally go home again."

When Jamie woke, his pillow would be soaked with sweat, and tears.

The sorrow faded with the return of the other students, and the resumption of a daily routine. Even so, it was a relief when three months later his uncle sent word that he would be allowed to come back for the spring holiday.

The man made a point of letting Jamie know he had hidden the horn, by taking him into the study soon after his arrival at the house. He watched closely as the boy's eyes flickered over the walls, searching for the horn, and seemed satisfied at the expression of defeat that twisted his face before he closed in on himself, shutting out the world again.

But Jamie had become cunning. The defeat he showed his uncle was real. What the man didn't see, because the boy buried it as soon as he was aware of it, was that the defeat was temporary. For hiding the horn didn't make any difference. Now that Jamie had touched it, he was bound to it. Wherever it was hidden, he would find it. Its call was too powerful to mistake.

Even so, Jamie thought he might lose his mind before he got his chance. Day after day his uncle stayed in the house, guarding his treasure. Finally, on the morning of the fifth day, an urgent message pulled him away. Even then, the anger that burned in his face as he stormed through the great oak doors, an anger Jamie knew was rooted in being called from his vigil, might have frightened someone less determined.

The boy didn't care. He would make his way to the horn while he had the chance.

He knew where it was, of course—had known from the evening of the first day.

It was in his uncle's bedroom.

The room was locked. Moving cautiously, Jamie slipped downstairs to the servant's quarters and stole the master key, then scurried back to the door. To his surprise he felt no fear.

He decided it was because he had no choice; he was only doing what he had to do.

He twisted the key in the lock and swung the door open.

His uncle’s room was large and richly decorated, filled with heavy, carefully carved furniture. Above the dresser hung a huge mirror.

Jamie hesitated for just a moment, then lay on his stomach and peered beneath the bed.

The horn was there, wrapped in a length of blue velvet.

He reached in and drew the package out. Then he stood, and placed it gently on the bed. With reverent fingers he unrolled the velvet. Cradled by the rich blue fabric, the horn looked like a comet blazing across a midnight sky.

This time there could be no interruption. Hesitating for no more than a heartbeat, he reached out and clutched the horn with both hands.

He cried out, in agony, and in awe. For a moment he thought he was going to die. The feelings the horn unleashed within him seemed too much for his body to hold. He didn’t die, though his heart was racing faster than it had any right to.

More,” he thought, as images of the place he had seen in his dreams rushed through his mind. “I have to know more.”

He drew the horn to his chest, and laid his cheek against it.

He thought his heart would beat its way out of his body.

And still it wasn’t enough.

He knew what he had to do next. But he was afraid.

Fear made no difference. He remembered again what his father had said about people aching to find their true name. He was close to his now. “No one can come this close and not reach out for the answer,” he thought. “The emptiness would kill them on the spot.”

And so he did what he had to do, fearful as it was. Placing the base of the horn against the foot of the massive bed, he set the tip of it against his heart.

Then he leaned forward.

The point of the horn pierced his flesh like a sword made of fire and ice. He cried out, first in pain, then in joy and wonder. Finally the answer was clear to him, and he understood his obsession, and his loneliness.

“No wonder I didn’t fit,” he thought, as his fingers fused, then split into cloven hooves.

The transformation was painful. But the joy so far surpassed it that he barely noticed the fire he felt as his neck began to stretch, and the horn

erupted from his brow. “No wonder, no wonder, no it’s all wonder, wonder, wonder and joy!”

He reared back in triumph, his silken mane streaming behind him, as he trumpeted the joyful discovery that he was, and always had been, and always would be, a unicorn.

And knowing his name, he finally knew how to go home. Hunching the powerful muscles of his hind legs, he launched himself toward the dresser. His horn struck the mirror, and it shattered into a million pieces that crashed and tinkled into two different worlds.

He hardly noticed. He was through, and home at last.

“No,” said a voice at the back of his head. “You’re not home yet.”

He stopped. It was true. He wasn’t home yet, though he was much closer. But there was still more to do, and further to go.

How could that be? He knew he was, had always been, a unicorn. Then he trembled, as he realized his father’s last words were still true. There was still something inside that needed to be discovered, to be named.

He whickered nervously as he realized all he had really done was come back to where most people begin—his own place, his own shape.

He looked around. He was standing at the edge of a clearing in an old oak wood. Sunlight filtered through the leaves, dappling patches of warmth onto his flanks. He paused for a moment, taking pleasure in feeling his own true shape at last.

Suddenly he shivered, then stood stock still as the smell of the girl reached his nostrils.

The scent was sweet, and rich, and he could resist it no more than he had resisted the horn. He began trotting in her direction, sunlight bouncing off the horn that jutted out from his forehead.

He found her beneath an apple tree, singing to herself while she brushed her honey-colored hair. Doves rustled and cooed at the edges of the clearing. They reminded him of the pigeons his father had raised.

As he stood and watched her, every fiber of his being cried out that there was danger here. But it was not in the nature of a unicorn to resist such a girl.

Lowering his head, he walked forward.

“So,” she said. “You’ve come at last.”

He knelt beside her, and she began to stroke his mane. Her fingers felt cool against his neck, and she sang to him in a voice that seemed to wash away old sorrows. He relaxed into a sweet silence, content for the first time that he could remember.

He wanted the moment to go on forever.

But it ended almost instantly, as the girl slipped a golden bridle over his head, and his uncle stepped into the clearing.

The man was wearing a wizard's garb, which didn't surprise Jamie. Ten armed soldiers stood behind him.

Jamie sprang to his feet. But he had been bound by the magic of the bridle; he could neither run nor attack.

Flanks heaving, he stared at his wizard uncle.

"Did you really think you could get away from me?" asked the man.

"I have!" thought Jamie fiercely, knowing the thought would be understood.

"Don't be absurd!" snarled his uncle. "I'll take your horn, as I did your father's. And then I'll take your shape, and finally your memory. You'll come back with me, and be no different than he was—a dreamy, foolish mortal, lost and out of place."

"Why?" thought Jamie. "Why would anyone want to hold a unicorn?"

His uncle didn't answer.

Jamie locked eyes with him, begging him to explain.

No answer came. But he realized he had found a way to survive. Just as the golden bridle held him helpless, so his gaze could hold his uncle. As long as he could stare into the man's eyes, he could keep him from moving.

He knew, too, that as soon as he flinched, the battle would be over.

Jamie had no idea how long the struggle actually lasted. They seemed to be in a place apart, far away from the clearing, away from the girl, and the soldiers.

He began to grow fearful. Sooner or later he would falter and his uncle would regain control. It wasn't enough to hold him. He had to conquer him.

But how? How? He couldn't win unless he knew why he was fighting. He had to discover why his uncle wanted to capture and hold him.

But the only way to do that was to look deeper inside the man. The idea frightened him; he didn't know what he would find there. Even worse, it

would work two ways. He couldn't look deeper into his uncle, without letting his uncle look more deeply into him.

He hesitated. But there was no other way. Accepting the risk, he opened himself to his uncle.

At the same time, he plunged into the man's soul.

His uncle cried out, then dropped to his knees and buried his face in his hands, trembling with the humiliation of being seen.

Jamie trembled too, for the emptiness he found inside this man could swallow suns and devour planets. This was the hunger that had driven him to capture unicorns, in the hope that their glory could fill his darkness.

Then, at last, Jamie knew what he must do. Stepping forward, he pressed the tip of his horn against his uncle's heart.

He had been aware of his horn's healing power, of course. But this was the first time he had tried to use it. He wasn't expecting the shock of pain that jolted through him, or the wave of despair that followed as he took in the emptiness, and the fear, and the hunger that had driven his uncle for so long.

He wanted to pull away, to run in terror.

But if he did, it would only start all over again. Only a healing would put an end to the pursuit. And this was the only way to heal this man, this wizard, who, he now understood, had never really been his uncle, but only his captor. He had to be seen, in all his sorrow and his ugliness; seen, and accepted, and loved. Only then could he be free of the emptiness that made him want to possess a unicorn.

Jamie trembled as the waves of emptiness and sorrow continued to wash through him. But at last he was nearly done. Still swaying from the effort, he whispered to the man: "Go back. Go back and find your name. And then —go *home*."

That was when the sword fell, slicing through his neck.

It didn't matter, really, though he felt sorry for his "uncle," who began to weep, and sorrier still for the soldier who had done the deed. He knew it would be a decade or so before the man could sleep without mind-twisting nightmares of the day he had killed a unicorn.

But for Jamie himself, the change made no difference. Because he still was what he had always been, what he always would be, what a unicorn

had simply been one appropriate shape to hold. He was a being of power and light.

He shook with delight, as he realized that he had named himself at last.

He turned to the wizard, and was amazed. No longer hampered by mere eyes, he could see that the same thing was true for him—as it was for the girl, as it was for the soldiers.

They were *all* beings of power and light.

The terrible thing was, they didn't know it.

Suddenly he understood. This was the secret, the unnamed thing his father had been trying to remember: that we are all beings of power and light. And all the pain, all the sorrow—it all came from not knowing this simple truth.

Why? wondered Jamie. *Why don't any of us know how beautiful we really are?*

And then even that question became unimportant, because his father had come to take him home, and suddenly he wasn't just a unicorn, but was all unicorns, was part of every wise and daring being that had worn that shape and that name, every unicorn that had ever lived, or ever would live. And he felt himself stretch to fill the sky, as the stars came tumbling into his body, stars at his knees and at his hooves, at his shoulder and his tail, and most of all a shimmer of stars that lined the length of his horn, a horn that stretched across the sky, pointing out, for anyone who cared to look, the way to go home.

The Boy With Silver Eyes

A Tale from the Unicorn Chronicles

THERE is always one unicorn on Earth, come as a reminder of what the world has lost. This is an ancient promise, made by the unicorns after they fled to the world called Luster because the hunt for them had become so savage they feared they could not survive.

There is always one unicorn on Earth, a unicorn who risks his life by returning from Luster so we will not forget the sweetness and the magic that were once our birthright.

There is always one unicorn on Earth, who is come to spend twenty-five years as the Guardian of Memory, the sweet reminder of what we once had.

Alas, this unicorn does not always survive that service.

This is how it was with Streamstrider, who liked to dance on water and could prance across a river on the tips of his hooves. At least, he could until the day a Hunter's arrow found his heart.

A shiver ran through the unicorns of Luster when Streamstrider fell, for they always know, at once and without question, when one of their own has died. The queen, Arabella Skydancer, wept the most bitter tears of all, for it was she who had given the pledge to send a unicorn back to Earth. Though she had known when she made the promise that it was not without danger, it still pierced her own heart like an arrow every time that price was paid.

The Hunter who had slain Streamstrider cut off the glimmering horn and took the trophy to the woman called Beloved, who was the leader of the Hunter clan, and the ancient enemy of all unicorns. She clutched it to her chest and crooned with delight that another of the foe had fallen.

And then the Hunter did something else, something no Hunter had ever done before, and none has dared do since. He skinned the carcass and cut up the meat, which he took home to feed his family—his wife, Therese, and his son, Nils, who was but four years old. But Therese would not touch the meat, for though it sizzled tantalizingly on the spit, the smell of it—a smell of clear water and mountain breezes, of fresh spring grass and flowers not

yet open—was strange, and it frightened her. Nor did Nils want to eat, for he saw his mother's fear, and it made him afraid as well. But the boy feared his father's wrath even more, and when the Hunter raised his fist and roared, "You'll eat, by God, or I'll know the reason why!" Nils put a piece of the meat to his lips.

When the Hunter saw this he was satisfied, and cut a huge chunk of the unicorn meat for himself. Silvery blood ran over his chin as he crammed the gobbet into his mouth. But he was a hasty man, and he chewed only two or three times before he tried to swallow. The meat lodged in his gullet and he began to choke. Eyes bulging, he clutched at his throat. No sound came from his open mouth.

Nils watched in terror as his mother screamed and pounded on his father's back. Her efforts were of no avail; moments later the Hunter lay on the floor, his face blue, his chest unmoving.

Only then—and mostly because he did not know what else to do—did Nils swallow the piece of meat he had been holding in his own mouth.

In that moment he was changed forever.

Nils and his mother lived in a cottage at the edge of the great northern forest. Though they were far from rich, they did not want for any of the necessities of life. In part this was because Therese was a skilled gardener and seamstress. But it was also because Beloved sent Therese a small bag of gold every year, as a token of her appreciation for what her husband had done. And, though the two did not know it, other Hunters kept watch on the cottage, to make sure they remained safe.

After the first year, Therese did not say anything to Nils about the gold. This was because the first time he saw it he shrieked in horror and fled the cottage, and it took her seven hours to find him.

Despite being safe and having enough to eat, Therese did not rest easy, for two things gnawed at her heart. The first was sorrow for her lost husband, who had been gruff and demanding but also a cherished companion. The second was Nils, who grew stranger and more dreamy with every passing month. Something in the boy's eyes when he gazed into the woods troubled her. Even worse were the days when he sat at the side of the cottage, staring into the forest and singing wordlessly to himself—a song so

filled with longing that it made his mother weep, which was something the boy himself never did.

Sometimes she would sit down beside him and ask, “What are you looking for, Nils?”

“I don’t know,” he would whisper. “Something. I want *something*, Mother. But I don’t know what it is.”

These were strange words to hear from a boy who was but five years old, and they troubled Therese greatly.

Once he woke her in the middle of a rainy night, saying, “Listen! *Listen!*”

“It’s only the rain,” she said, caressing his golden hair.

“No, not the rain. The voices *in* the rain. What are they saying? I can’t understand them!”

When Therese told Nils there were no voices, at least none that she could hear, his eyes grew wide and he crawled into bed beside her, where he spent the rest of the night shivering in terror.

Despite these things, much of the time Nils was one of the happiest creatures in all the north. This was partly because he loved the great forest behind their home, and spent most of his hours playing there.

At first his love for the forest worried Therese, who feared he would get lost in the deep strangeness of the place. When the boy was still little she tried putting him in a sort of harness and tying him to a tree so he could not wander more than thirty feet away. The first time he escaped from the harness—he was six, and she never did figure out how—she was seized with panic and she plunged into the forest in search of him. She had been looking for over an hour when he ambled up to her, seeming surprised to find her so upset. When she snatched him up he patted her cheeks with his little hands and crooned, “Don’t cry, Mama! Don’t cry!”

“Where have you been?” she demanded, anger and relief mixing in her voice.

“Looking for something.”

“Looking for what?”

Trouble clouded his eyes. “I don’t know,” he said sadly, twisting in her arms so he could stare back into the forest. “There’s something my heart needs to find. But I don’t know what it is.”

Therese carried him back to the cottage, her heart pounding, though she could no more say what she was afraid of than Nils could tell her what he

had gone in search of.

Another time he frightened her by running into the cottage and crying angrily, “The eyes under the bushes won’t come out and play with me!” When she tried to get him to tell her what he meant, all he would do was point at the bushes near the edge of the wood and howl, “There! There! The eyes under the bushes.”

“What do they look like?” she asked tenderly, her heart breaking with sorrow for his sorrow—and with fear that he was mad.

“I don’t know,” he whimpered. “All I can see is their eyes.”

As for Nils’s own eyes, they came to be a matter of some discussion in the village, for as he grew older they turned—so slowly that none could say when it happened, but surely as the changing of the seasons—from blue to silver. Eventually “the boy with silver eyes” was all that some of the villagers would call him, as if they had never known his real name. Of course, these were the same ones who would spit between their fingers and make a sign to ward off evil when he passed. The other boys teased him mercilessly, of course, calling him “witchborn” and “moonchild.”

Much as some of the villagers feared Nils, once he reached a certain age he found that others—specifically young women—were irresistibly drawn to him. This caused him no small distress. It was not that he did not like having girls follow him around; part of him rather enjoyed it. But they would follow whether he wanted them to or not, and—even worse—whether or not they already had boyfriends.

For a peace-loving boy, he had an astonishing number of fights.

When Nils was sixteen he went to his mother and said, “It is time for me to make my way in the world. I must leave you now.”

And though she wept, she knew that he was right. She offered him gold to help him on his travels, but he would not take it, for it still filled him with horror, though he could not say why.

The day he left home Nils had not gone far into the forest when he realized that Sylvie, one of the girls from town, had followed him.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” Sylvie replied, seeming not only confused by the question but startled to find herself alone with him in the wild. “It’s just that—well, I thought you were leaving, Nils, and the idea scared me. Our town

will not be the same without you—without your eyes.” Reaching out a trembling hand, she stroked his cheek.

Before Nils could think of what to say he heard a furious roar. Looking past Sylvie’s shoulder he saw her father, a beefy man with large fists and an even larger temper, racing toward them.

Feeling no need to prove his valor, Nils turned and fled, running as far and as fast as his feet would carry him. He dashed through the darkening woods, vaulting over fallen logs, splashing through crystal streams, stumbling over rocks and root-rippled ground until at last he flung himself down beneath a vast old oak, where he lay clutching his side and gasping for breath.

He had been there for some time before the tree began to speak to him.

“You are different,” it said, in a voice that seemed to come from the earth itself, rising in slow waves that Nils heard not with his ears but with his very skin.

“I know,” said Nils ruefully.

“Don’t . . . talk . . . so . . . fast,” replied the tree, speaking so deliberately that it took four hours to finish the sentence. “Just . . . *listen.*”

So Nils, who felt as if he had grown roots himself, lay still and listened, slowly and deeply, in a way he never had before. And as he lay there, nestled in the tree’s roots, it murmured to him of the forest secrets, telling him it had waited hundreds of years for a human who could hear it.

“You have a long road ahead,” said his new friend. “Seeds that are just sprouting will be trees many times your height before your heart will be at peace. You must learn to sing four things: the Songs of the Earth, the Fire, the Water, and the Air. Three to save a life, the last to put your own soul at rest. This I know from the soil on my roots and the sun on my leaves, from the rain and the wind, which carry me news.”

This took many days and nights to say, of course, and Nils stayed all this time without moving, locked in a sort of trance.

Finally the tree fell silent, and Nils stretched as if waking from a dream. He looked around.

The woods were dark, and he had no idea how long he had been here, nor, in truth, where he was.

“Well, my lad,” he said to himself, “you’ve done it this time. But morning will come soon enough.”

He was gathering some leaves to make a rough mattress when he noticed an ugly little face peering over one of the thick roots that rumpled the ground around him. He caught his breath and held motionless, afraid of frightening his visitor. He knew those eyes; they were the eyes he had seen from the time he was little. But now, at last, he could see the face that went with them, and he knew it was because the tree had changed him, taught him to see more slowly.

The eyes blinked and began to back away.

"Don't go," whispered Nils, his voice low but filled with urgency.

The creature ducked behind one of the thick roots. Nils strained his ears, but could hear not the slightest rustle in the leaves. He counted ten long breaths, then said softly, "Are you still there?"

"No!"

Nils laughed. "Good. I was afraid you were going to stay and bother me all night long."

"You're not supposed to be able to see me," said the voice querulously. "No one can see us these days."

"Well, I didn't used to be able to see you," confessed Nils. "Just your eyes."

"As if that's not enough! Well, since you've already seen me, there's no point in hiding." And with that the creature climbed over the root. Not quite two feet high, it stood, hands on hips, staring at Nils defiantly.

"*What* are you?" Nils asked in astonishment.

"You can't tell?" replied the little man, sounding more irritated than ever. "Look at these ears!"

And, indeed, his ears were of interest, since they were pointed and at least twice as large as would have seemed normal for the size of his head.

"Look at these hands!"

The creature held out his hands, which were corded with veins. The fingers were long, the knuckles thick and knobbly.

"Look at this nose!" he fairly shrieked, plucking at the oversized sausage that grew between his eyes. "I'm a goblin, you fool. A goblin! And now that you've seen me, I'll have to take you to the land below."

"I should probably tell my mother before we go," said Nils.

The goblin sighed. "You really are a bit of a simpleton, aren't you? No one gets to leave a message before taking such a journey!"

Suddenly Nils heard mutterings and stirrings all about him. A moment later he saw dozens of pairs of eyes—and a moment after that the goblins those eyes belonged to. With a cry, the ugly creatures rushed forward and snatched him off the ground. As Nils thrashed and struggled and cried out for help, they scampered across the forest floor, bearing him on their shoulders. Their little hands were incredibly strong, and fight as he might Nils could not escape.

What the goblins did not understand was that if they had only asked, Nils would have been perfectly happy to go with them on his own. He was always eager to see a new place, in the hope that he might, at last, find the unknown thing he was still searching for.

Moonlight lay in silver puddles upon the forest floor. The branches of the trees cast strange and threatening shadows. Nils's captors followed a stream to a waterfall that hid the mouth of a deep cave; when they scampered behind the falls Nils had passed from the world we know to the strange and secret world of the goblins, which they call Nilbog.

Down they went, through secret stony passages, deep into the earth. Sometimes they traveled in darkness complete, sometimes on paths lit by torches topped with flickering flames of green, and more than once through caverns where the only light came from thick shelves of fungus that glowed pale blue.

The goblins came at last to the vast cavern where their king's castle had been built. They carried Nils across the drawbridge, through the gate, and into the presence of the king, who sat upon a throne carved from stone and clutched a ruby scepter while he scowled at the world.

"Why have you brought this human here?" demanded the king.

"He can see us!" cried the goblin to whom Nils had first spoken.

This so startled the king that he dropped his scepter. "Put him down," he ordered.

Immediately, the goblins dropped Nils to the floor.

The king stepped down from his throne to stare at Nils, who remained sprawled on the floor. "You have strange eyes," he said at last. "So perhaps it is true. Can you really see us?"

"I can," said Nils, trying to keep his voice from quaking.

"Prove it!" demanded the king.

So Nils described the king, telling him every detail of how he looked, from the wart at the end of his wobbly nose to the curving claws at the tips of his thick green toes.

To Nils's astonishment, the king began to weep. "At last!" he cried. "At last! It's been so long since anyone could see us that I had begun to fear we no longer existed. For you, my boy, a great boon is in order! Follow me!"

And so, with goblins capering behind them, the king led Nils to the Treasure Chamber of Nilbog. Throwing wide the great doors he cried, "Take what you wish, lad. Anything you want is yours!"

Nils gasped. The room was filled with all things strange and wonderful, with goblin gold and massive gems, with swords and spears and kitchen knives, with shields and crowns, and enchanted jewels that whispered their names in the night. But as he looked, one thing only caught his heart, a plain harp made of dark wood that sat at the edge of the chamber. He remembered what the tree had told him, that he must learn to sing. So he plucked the harp from the pile, saying, "I'll take this."

"But it is worth hardly anything," said the king.

"It is what I want."

"It doesn't even have all its strings," protested the king, eager to have Nils take something finer and more precious. "See, the longest one is broken. Take something else."

"You have offered a boon," said Nils stubbornly, "and this is what I would like. May I have it?"

"I suppose so," grumbled the king. "But never say the goblins were stingy with you."

"You have given me what I wanted," replied Nils, clutching the harp to his chest. "That is generous enough."

"Let us at least teach you our songs," said the goblin king.

"Are they the Songs of the Earth?" Nils asked hopefully. "I have been told that is what I must learn."

"What else would they be?" asked the king.

So Nils agreed to stay.

He spent three years with the goblins, listening to their songs and practicing on the harp. He had hoped the instrument would be magic, and play with

beauty the moment his fingers touched its strings. But this was not so, and Nils spent many hours learning to coax sweet music from it, trying not to be vexed by the missing string.

When he had learned all the Songs of the Earth, and could also play the harp passably well, the goblins placed a magic on the instrument to keep it safe from harm, then pointed him to a path and told him it would take him to the surface.

What they neglected to tell him was that there was a dragon along the way.

This was not malice on their part. The dragon, whose name was Gorefang, was the last dragon on Earth. He had been slumbering for so long he had been forgotten by everyone, even the other dragons, who had left for another world long ago. In fact, he himself had almost forgotten he existed. But when Nils came stumbling into his cave Gorefang roused himself. With flames flickering at the edges of his nostrils he grumbled, “What do you want . . . human?”

“I wish I could tell you,” replied Nils. “But I do not really know, which is why my heart knows no rest.”

“And why do you have such strange eyes?”

Though Nils did not care to tell the story of what had happened when he was young, one does not lie to a dragon.

“A sad tale,” murmured Gorefang at last. “No wonder you are restless.” Shifting one massive claw so that it pointed at the harp Nils carried, he said, “It has been long since I heard music. Play for me.”

“I know only the Songs of the Earth. I’m not sure they would please a dragon.”

“They’ll do for a start. When you have sung those until I am tired of them, you can learn more. After all, we have plenty of time.” With that Gorefang shifted one vast, scaly wing so that it blocked the passage out.

With a sigh, Nils began to strum the harp. His music was better now than when he first picked it up, but still not what he wanted.

When he had played the songs he knew many times over, Gorefang yawned and said, “Enough. They were fine, but I cannot bear to hear them any more. Why don’t I teach you some new ones?” And for the next three years he did just that, teaching Nils the old songs of dragonkind, the Songs of Fire that could set a heart aflame.

During those years Nils drank from cold underground streams, and ate little more than mushrooms and blind fish, though the dragon would toast them until they were quite tasty.

One day Gorefang closed his eyes and said, “I’m tired, and I’ve taught you all the songs I know. It is time for you to go.”

Nils thanked the dragon seven times, then strapped the harp to his back and continued on his way.

His skin was pale now from his years underground, and he was more restless than ever, for something still gnawed at his heart, though it was nothing he could name.

When he had finally made his way to the surface he found himself at the edge of the northern sea. After gazing out at its vast grey surface, he sat upon a rock and began to sing, first the Songs of the Earth, then the Songs of Fire. They were lovely, even though he was hampered by the missing string.

While he was singing the fourth of the Songs of Fire he heard a splash. Looking down, he saw a mermaid, her gold-green hair floating like a fan over the water, her great fish tail clearly visible beneath the waves. She sang to him. He responded with one of the dragon’s songs. She sang again, and beckoned, and with no thought for life or future Nils clambered down the rocks and into the water. The mermaid gazed into his silver eyes, then twined her arms around his neck and pulled him to the bottom of the sea, where she gave him a shell that let him breathe.

For three years Nils lived beneath the waves with the mermaid, and was her love, and they taught each other songs. But at the end of that time he grew restless, because his heart was still hungry, though he could not say why. So the mermaid carried him to the surface and let him go, kissing him once for love and biting him once for anger before she sped him on his way.

So now Nils knew the Songs of the Earth and the Songs of Fire and the Songs of the Water, and he wandered the north, going from village to village, singing for his supper. He had learned to play his harp quite beautifully by this time, and the missing string bothered no one but himself, because he was the only one who knew there were still songs he could not play, and chords beyond those his harp could sound. Still, his appearance troubled people, for they had never seen anyone so pale, much less one with eyes of silver.

As the decades passed, his hair became silver as well. Even in age he was beautiful, though in a strange and distant way, and everywhere he went at least one maiden would try to follow when he left. To stop her, he would sing a song so laced with loss and longing that she would sit by the side of the road and weep, unable to move. Then he would go forward alone.

Finally one maiden, bolder or more sly than others, followed him at a greater distance. He didn't realize she had done so until late at night, when he woke to find her on the opposite side of his dying campfire, staring at him with more curiosity than love, which he found refreshing.

"Why do you never stay in one place?" she asked.

The wind sang gently through the tops of the pine trees. The stars blazed in an ebony sky. And Nils's heart nearly burst with the question.

"I'm looking for something," he whispered.

"What?"

"I don't know."

"You would be a dangerous man to love."

"You could not pick anyone worse."

"My name is Ivy Morris, and I will walk for a while with you."

Despite his efforts to turn her away, the girl traveled with Nils for a year and a day. When he sang the song that had stopped the others in their tracks —which he did more than once—she continued walking, tears streaming down her face, murmuring, "I understand, for I am a wanderer, too."

Finally Nils wrote a new song, just for her. He called it "Song of the Wanderer," and it spoke of both their lives:

Across the gently rolling hills
Beyond high mountain peaks
Along the shores of distant seas
There's something my heart seeks

But there's no peace in wandering
The road's not made for rest
And footsore fools will never know
What home might suit them best.

Ivy thanked him for the song.

The next day she was gone.

To the south, the world was changing as the age of machines crept on, transforming the earth in more ways than the people who were building and making and inventing could begin to understand. But in the northern forest Nils continued his wandering, spending less and less time in the villages, and more time on the mountainsides, trailing the splashing streams, sitting on high promontories, singing only to the wind and the eagles.

And then one night, standing on a high hill and looking down at a crystal stream, Nils saw at last the thing he desired, the thing he had sought all these years, the thing he had longed for without knowing what it was he longed for, the thing his family had wronged so badly, so long ago.

It was a unicorn.

Nils stood as if frozen while he watched it drink from the clear, cold water. Its coat glowed like white fire in the moonlight. Its creamy mane was like the froth on the waves of the northern sea where he had swum with his mermaid love, and its horn was a spiraled lance that seemed carved from the jewels of the earth. The sight of the creature filled him with such terrible longing that he could not speak.

When the unicorn turned from the stream he followed it, much as the girl named Ivy had followed him, though at a greater distance. He did not want it to know he was there. Not yet. Not yet.

It was not hard for Nils to trail the creature, for his heart was so tied to it that even when it was beyond the edge of his vision he could sense it. But Nils was not the only one stalking the unicorn. One afternoon as he came over a ridge and saw, as he knew he would, the unicorn in the green valley below he saw something else, too. Something that filled him with cold terror.

It was a Hunter. Not just a man out hunting for his family. This was one of his own family, a man like his father who had but one mission in life—to find and slay the unicorns.

That was bad enough. Even worse, he had already captured this unicorn. It was an old story, one that Nils knew well. In the clearing stood a maiden. The unicorn had come to her, as a unicorn always will to a maiden in the woods, and she had slipped a golden bridle over his head, putting him in her

power. Now she held him while the Hunter approached, spear in hand, ready to strike the final blow.

Nils was too far away to stay the Hunter's hand.

So he did the only thing he could, the only thing he knew.

He sang.

Taking his harp from his back, he sang the saddest song he knew, using every trick he had learned from goblin, from dragon, from mermaid, every bit of skill he had gathered in the decades since he first touched the harp.

The Hunter hesitated. His hands began to tremble.

Nils started forward. He sang more softly now, intimately, caressing the Hunter's heart with the pain that had clutched his own for all these years, crafting his song like an arrow to pierce the other, and pouring into its notes all he knew of loss and longing.

The Hunter turned and stared at Nils in wonder. Then he dropped his spear, fell to his knees, and began to sob, releasing a flood of sorrow that had been locked in his heart from the first time his father had beat him as a boy and told him that real men never cry.

Nils walked past the sobbing hunter, past the terrified girl.

"I have been seeking you for a long time," he said as he slipped the golden bridle from the unicorn's head.

The silver-eyed creature did not answer, but knelt in a clear invitation. Nils climbed on its back, and they fled through the forest, leaving Hunter and maiden far behind. When they were many miles away the unicorn stopped and Nils slid to the ground.

The unicorn turned to him and Nils, who would have done anything for the beast, suffered anything for it, did not move at all when it stepped toward him, pointed its horn directly at his chest, and pierced the flesh above his heart.

Nils was sure he was about to die. To his astonishment, what happened instead was that the unicorn was able to speak to him.

To his sorrow, its voice was filled with horror.

"Something has happened to you," it said. "You've been touched by something, changed by something. You have—I don't know what this means—you have a bit of unicorn in you."

Nils's shame was so great that his first thought was to turn and run. But he could not leave the presence of the unicorn.

Nor could he stay silent.

So he told the story of what had happened when he was young, and his father had slain the unicorn. As he spoke he began to weep, something he had not done since he was four years old. And he wept even more when the unicorn wept, too—and still harder when it placed its horn across his shoulder and murmured, “Whatever forgiveness you need, I grant.”

In the storm of weeping that followed, Nils shed all the tears that had been locked inside since the moment he had swallowed the unicorn’s flesh, tears for himself, for his mother, even for his father: tears of guilt, tears of rage, tears of loss.

He wept until there was no more silver in his eyes, and they were once again as they had been when he was a boy, as blue as the northern skies. And where each tear fell a flower grew, a little white flower that grows to this day in the northern hills, and which herb women call Heart’s Ease.

When at last he was done with weeping, the unicorn, whose name was Cloudmane, and who was the first female unicorn ever to act as Guardian of Memory, said, “Pluck a hair from my tail.”

Nils blinked. “Why would you want me to do that?”

She nudged him playfully and said, “Because your harp is in need of a string.”

So Nils did as she said. The silver hair was gossamer thin, but stronger than steel, and when he had used it to string his harp, he ran his fingers over it, and heard at last the sound he had been waiting so many years to hear. Then he wept once more, this time for joy.

Nils traveled with Cloudmane for three years, and in that time she taught him the songs of the unicorns, which are the Songs of the Air, and his heart was at peace.

When Cloudmane had taught him the last of the songs she knew, Nils bid her good-bye. Then he climbed to the top of a mountain where he sat himself down. Gazing out at the world, he sang and sang, until at last he could sing no more.

THE GUARDIAN OF MEMORY

A Tale from the Unicorn Chronicles

THE banging at the door woke Grimwold, keeper of the Unicorn Chronicles, from his nap.

Naturally, this made the old dwarf even more crotchety than usual, and he grumbled mightily as he headed down the long, wood-paneled tunnel that led to the outside world.

The banging continued.

"I'm coming!" he shouted as he stumped along. "I'm *coming!*"

The banging went on, unabated. He could tell from the sound that it was made by a hoof.

"Bang, bang, bang," he muttered. "Dratted nuisance anyway." When he finally reached the door he yanked it open and snarled, "Well, what do *you* want?"

The unicorn standing outside looked slightly startled. Speaking respectfully, he said, "It is time for the changing of the guard. The queen sent us to escort you to the ceremony."

"Well there's no need to kick the door down! I was just getting my things ready. Come in while I finish." He glanced past the unicorn and sighed. Four others stood waiting behind the one he had been speaking to.

"You can *all* come in," he grumbled.

Quietly, on hooves that could cross a field of flowers without bending a stem, the glory of unicorns entered Grimwold's underground home. They passed through the door like a sudden surge of moonlight, manes and tails shimmering, horns like spears made of pearl and ice.

"I'll be with you in a moment," said Grimwold.

Padding back through the lantern-lit tunnel, past the paintings of unicorns and mermaids and humans who had played a part in Luster's history, the dwarf made his way through the story room to the Chronicles themselves. Going to one of the oldest of the wooden racks, he selected the proper scroll

—though it was hardly necessary, since he knew the story he had to tell by heart.

He stopped in his living quarters long enough to grab a fresh robe and splash some water on his face, then returned to the waiting unicorns.

“You’re Dreamhorn,” he said, looking at the leader. “Son of Ayla Forestfriend. Am I right?”

Dreamhorn nodded. “You keep very good track of us.”

“Have to,” muttered Grimwold. “Queen insists. Well, what are we waiting for? If I have to do this, I have to. Let’s get going.”

Dreamhorn looked toward the others and nodded. They turned and went back through the door, which Grimwold had not bothered to close earlier.

The little man was the last to leave. He pulled the door shut behind him, sighed, then climbed onto Dreamhorn’s back. Riding a unicorn was supposed to be a great honor. Grimwold, however, preferred to walk and rode now only because he was too old to travel the entire distance to the gathering place on foot—a fact that annoyed him no end.

Grimwold and the unicorns journeyed peacefully, with no sign of the delvers that were the unicorns’ main enemy in Luster. Autumn was on the land, the forest was rich with the blues and silvers of the season. The wind moved occasionally through the fallen leaves, stirring and rustling them. The unicorns’ cloven silver hooves made no sound at all.

At the end of the third day they reached the gathering place, a large grotto where a high waterfall tumbled into a silver pool. Not all the unicorns of Luster were required to attend the ceremony; even this place could not hold that many. But there would be a good number of them—including all who might be chosen to become the new Guardian of Memory.

Though they reached the grotto two days before the ceremony was scheduled to take place, Arabella Skydancer, Queen of the Unicorns, was there to greet them.

Grimwold closed his eyes for just a moment when he spotted the queen. It hurt him to see how thin his old friend had become. Not thin in the sense of gaunt or bony. Arabella’s thinness was that of one who was fading away. Though he would not want to admit it out loud, Grimwold knew he would miss her when she left this world behind.

The queen bowed her head in greeting when she saw him enter the grotto. Grimwold returned the gesture, fighting down a surge of emotion as he remembered all they been through together over the years, the dangers they had faced, the boons she had granted him in return for his service.

“The time has come again,” she said softly, when he was standing close by her side.

“As it always does,” said Grimwold. “All too swiftly.”

“Not too swiftly for the current Guardian,” said the queen, sounding amused.

Grimwold nodded. Though it had been twenty-five years since the last changing of the guard, he remembered the ceremony vividly, and the sorrow that had followed when Night Eyes was chosen. Manda Seafoam, his mother, had been nearly inconsolable. But then, someone always mourned when the new Guardian was chosen.

“You have been well?” asked the Queen, interrupting his thoughts.

“Well enough.”

“And busy?”

“Too busy. If your subjects would stop having adventures for a year or two, I might be able to catch up on my work. As it is, Arabella, I fear I shall never be current.”

The queen laughed, a sound like water on smooth stones, like wind passing through daisies. Grimwold had been making the same complaint for over two hundred years.

“I’ll see what I can do,” she said.

Grimwold snorted, which is not considered an appropriate response to a queen. Arabella pretended not to hear.

The time until the ceremony passed rapidly—more rapidly than Grimwold would have liked, since several unicorns came to him with stories that needed to be told and recorded. He slept at night on a bed of ferns they had prepared for him. It was comfortable enough, but he preferred his cave. The sky above him was too big, and it made him nervous.

He was woken the first morning by a unicorn standing at the foot of his bed. She made no sound, simply stared at him. But the old dwarf felt her

presence, even in his sleep. Opening one eye he glared at the unicorn and growled, “Leave me alone.”

“I have to speak to you!”

With an exasperated sigh, Grimwold sat up. “About what? Not a story, I hope. I don’t take stories this early in the morning. Lots of others ahead of you, anyway.”

The unicorn shook her head. “I want you to tell me how I can be chosen as the next Guardian.”

Grimwold blinked in astonishment. “Have you been drinking moonbeams? No one *wants* that job. Do you have any idea how appalling it is?” He narrowed his eyes. “Who are you, anyway?”

The unicorn started to answer, but Grimwold raised his hand. “Wait, let me see if I can figure it out. Never saw you before, but I know that flow of mane. The horn—yes, the horn would be . . . Turn around!”

The unicorn did as asked, making a full circle for the dwarf.

Grimwold snorted in triumph. “You’re Cloudmane, daughter of Streamstrider. The queen is your grandmother.”

The unicorn’s large eyes widened in astonishment. “How did you do that?”

“It’s my job to keep track of you unicorns—even young and foolish ones like you. Now, why in the world do you want to be chosen Guardian? Oh, never mind. It doesn’t make any difference anyway, you silly thing. Only stallions take that job. It’s not for mares—and a good thing, too, dangerous, thankless task that it is. It’s more than those fools you creatures are doing it for deserve. Let them get on without you, that’s my stand on the matter. But the queen insists it has to be done. Says it’s important. Says something in them will die without you.” He narrowed his eyes. “So why is it *you* want the job? Out to prove something? Running away? Some young stallion break your heart?”

Cloudmane’s nostrils flared, and her enormous blue eyes flashed with a fire and a strength that surprised the old dwarf. “My reasons are my own,” she snapped, her mane bristling. “I ask only for some advice.”

“Then I’ll give you some. And I hope you’ll take it. Forget the whole idea. The job of Guardian is not for you—not for any unicorn in its right mind. It’s not a job you volunteer for, it’s a job you take only because you have no choice.”

“We’ll see about that,” muttered Cloudmane. Spinning on her silver hooves she trotted away, seafoam tail whisking angrily behind her. She made not a sound as she crossed the carpet of dried leaves that covered the forest floor.

Grimwold closed his eyes and tried to go back to sleep, but it was impossible. The rising sun was too bright, the conversation too upsetting. And he missed the comforts of his familiar caves. Feeling even crankier than usual, he rose and went to the stream to get a drink and wash his face.

The unicorns arrived in ones and twos at first—mostly those who had traveled the farthest and wanted to make sure to be there on time. As the day wore on they appeared in larger groups. Some of the groups were simply those who had met along the way and decided to finish the journey together. Others were made up of unicorns who had been traveling together for some time, usually those out on border patrol. Late in the afternoon a group of a dozen young stallions arrived, laughing and boisterous, and so full of loud energy and mock battles that at one point the queen herself had to call them down.

And all through the day as the unicorns arrived Grimwold fretted about his conversation with Cloudmane, and wondered if he should speak of it to the queen. But Arabella was busy with her duties. Between preparing for the ceremony and greeting old and honored friends, she had little enough time for him to bother her with nonsense from a young mare—nonsense that, in the end, would come to nothing anyway.

Many of the arriving unicorns made it a point to seek out Grimwold. Some came to tell him that they had new adventures for him to record in the Chronicles. Others wanted simply to greet him and to inquire after his health, a kindness that pleased the old dwarf in spite of himself.

He kept an eye out for Cloudmane, but did not see her again.

Aside from Grimwold, only a handful of two-legs were invited to the ceremony. One was a girl named Ivy, who had the queen’s blessing. Another was a painter named Master Chang, a handsome man with almond eyes and long, dark hair who sometimes made pictures of important events

in Luster, pictures that were stored with Grimwold in the Cavern of the Chronicles. A third was Madame Leonetti, an old woman who wore a dark blue robe and gazed out at the world from beneath its hood with eyes so sharp and bright it seemed they could start a fire of their own accord.

Ivy came to stand beside Grimwold as he was watching the unicorns gather. She fussed with her red hair for a moment—the wind kept trying to rearrange it—then asked shyly, “Did you finish my story?”

Grimwold, who was no taller than the girl, gave her a sad look. “I have finished writing down what happened to you so far. But it will be many years before your story is finished.” *Many long, hard years,* he wanted to add but bit back the words.

Ivy nodded. “May I stand with you for a while?”

“It would be my pleasure,” replied Grimwold. He was starting to feel nervous about the ceremony and his part in it, and was glad of a distraction.

After a while the dwarf and the girl climbed a narrow path that led to the top of the cliff over which the waterfall flowed. Evening passed softly into full night. Still standing together, high above the ceremonial ground, they continued to watch the unicorns gather.

It was like watching moonlight collect in a bowl, save that it seemed there were as many shades and tones of whiteness as there were stars burning in the vast, clear sky above them.

“Never this many at home,” said Ivy, looking upward.

“Unicorns, or stars?” asked Grimwold.

“No unicorns at home at all,” said Ivy sadly.

Grimwold snorted. “That’s not quite true, my girl. What do you think this ceremony is about, after all?”

“I don’t know.”

He turned to her in surprise. “No one has told you?”

“The queen said I would find out in good time.”

Grimwold hesitated, then said, “This may be as good a time as any.”

“Are you going to tell me a story?” Ivy asked eagerly.

“Might as well. Have to tell it down there in a little while. Good warm-up to tell it to you now.”

They walked along the edge of the cliff, going far enough from the waterfall that Grimwold could speak without having to work to be heard

above its sound. Ivy found a seat on a moss-covered rock. Grimwold stood before her and cleared his throat.

“You know, of course, that long ago the unicorns lived on Earth.”

“Of course,” said Ivy solemnly.

“And that they came here because they were hunted so ferociously that they were in danger of extinction.”

“Yes,” said Ivy sadly.

“But do you know what happened to your world after they left?”

She shook her head.

“Then I shall tell you.”

The old dwarf closed his eyes for a moment. Ivy heard the flick of wings above her, the occasional cry of a night-bird, a rustling in the nearby bushes. When Grimwold finally began to speak his voice was deeper, softer, calmer than usual.

This is the tale he told her:

In the long ago and sweet of the world, when things were slower but hearts were no less fierce, there came a time when the unicorns had to leave.

This was not done easily, nor was it done without grief. Earth was home to the unicorns, and they were part of it, horn and mane and hoof. But to stay was to die, for the hunting of unicorns by their enemies had become all too successful.

Finally they fled here to Luster.

The passage was not an easy one, and more than one unicorn gave its life to help in the creation of the first door between the two worlds.

When the great migration was over, and the last unicorn had left, it was as if the earth itself sighed with loss and sorrow.

For what is a world that has no unicorns?

That loss and that sorrow grew within the hearts of those who lived on Earth. Even those who had never seen a unicorn, never heard of a unicorn, felt the passing of something sweet and wonderful. It was as if the air had surrendered a bit of its spice, the water a bit of its sparkle, the night a bit of its mystery.

But only a few knew the reason for this.

Not all felt the loss in equal measure, naturally. The coarse and the crude were but vaguely aware of something making them uneasy in their quiet moments. Most people simply felt a little sadder, a little wearier. But for those most open to the beauty of the world and all its joys and sorrows, there was an ache in the heart that grew greater by the day, until it seemed that grief would overwhelm them.

Painters painted only scenes of sorrow; singers and players now made only mournful music; storytellers, sensing the loss, told tales that made their audiences weep long into the night, and offered no light tales, no comedy, for relief.

Gloom enfolded the world.

And finally a child—it's always a child, you know—decided something had to be done.

She was the daughter of a storyteller, and seemed likely to become a storyteller herself. Her name was Alma, and she had a heart of steel and fire. She went to her brother, Balan, and said, "Something is wrong, and I am going to find out what. Will you travel with me, brother?"

And though Balan was more given to doing than to thinking, to fighting than to feeling, he agreed to go with his sister, for he did not want her to travel alone. She gathered some food and a few coins, which she carried in a pack on her back, and several of her father's best stories, which she carried in her heart, and set out. She went on foot, and Balan walked beside her, one hand always on his sword.

The sword was much needed, for the road was perilous. It had always been dangerous, even in the best of times. But with the passing of the unicorns, hearts had become hungry, and in some that hunger had turned to viciousness.

For three years Alma and Balan traveled through peril and pain, and many times Balan's sword saved them from disaster, and many other times Alma's stories gained them food and shelter, and sometimes even a clue.

Finally, weak and weary, wandering through a deep forest, they came upon the home of an old magician named Bellenmore. It was set in the side of a hill, and magic hung thick about it. When they first approached the door it began to sing, calling, "Bellenmore, Bellenmore! Wanderers two outside your door!"

Then a wall—or something like a wall, for they could not see it, only feel it—rose in front of them, and they could go no farther.

There they waited until an old man came limping out of the cottage. Glaring at them from under bushy eyebrows, he said in a voice that creaked and cracked with age, “Well, what do you want?”

“We want to know what’s gone wrong with the world,” said Alma, her voice gentle, coaxing. “For three years now things have seemed flat and stale. Something is lost, and we have come seeking it.”

Bellenmore closed his eyes, and gave out a sigh so heavy it seemed to flow not from his body but from someplace deep in the earth itself. “I was afraid of this.”

“Of what?” asked Balan, struggling to raise his sword, which seemed frozen at his side.

“Of exactly what this girl—your sister, I assume from the look of her—has just described. The unicorns have gone, and when they left they took with them something that is essential to the human heart.”

“The unicorns!” said Alma, with sudden understanding. “Where have they gone? And why? How did they get there? Can I follow them?”

“Hold, hold!” cried the old magician, raising his hands. “One question at a time.”

He studied them for a moment, then made a small gesture with the little finger of his right hand. The invisible wall disappeared, and Balan gained control of his sword once more.

“You may come in,” said Bellenmore.

Balan glanced at his sister. “Do you think it’s safe?”

“Nothing is safe,” she said sharply. Then she stepped forward, toward the old man, and followed him through the door into the hill.

The inside of his house was warm and cozy, and slightly strange. A green fire crackled on the hearth. On the mantel above the fireplace stood a row of earthenware mugs with hideous faces. One of them winked at Alma, another leered and rolled its eyes, and a third stuck out its tongue and made a rude noise. Then they all began to sing a bawdy song, until Bellenmore waved a hand to silence them.

The tables and chairs were made of dark wood, and ornately carved—some with odd designs, others with scenes of dragons and unicorns. At one side of the room was a tall oaken stand; a thick book rested open upon it.

The longest table held a glass cage with no top. Inside the cage was a lizard, which was resting its front legs on the upper edge of the cage and staring out at them with a curious expression.

“Sit,” said Bellenmore, gesturing toward one of the chairs.

Alma sat. Balan stood behind her, both because he had not been invited to sit, and because he would not have sat even had he been asked. His hand rested on the hilt of his sword.

Bellenmore did sit, his robe shifting and whispering around him as if it were alive.

“Alas, the unicorns,” he said sadly.

“What happened to them?” asked Alma.

“They were driven away. There is a family that holds an ancient grudge against them, and the hunting had become so fierce it seemed they all might perish. Finally the unicorn queen came to me and asked if I might open a door for them, as I had done for the dragons.”

“The dragons?” asked Balan, confused.

The magician shrugged. “It was much the same thing. The world is changing, boy. Wildness and magic are in retreat before the rise of men. Better—much better—it would be for science and magic, order and wildness, natural and supernatural to live together. But that cannot be, at least not for now. So the dragons have gone, and the unicorns had to leave as well. I helped them open a door to a place that they have named Luster. It is a good place for them. But they did take a piece of our hearts with them when they went.”

“Send me through the door,” said Alma.

The old man looked startled. “That’s not possible.”

“Why?”

Bellenmore blew a puff of air through his shaggy white mustache, then looked down at his knobby hands. Finally he said, “The queen wouldn’t like it.”

“I don’t like what’s happened here,” replied Alma firmly. “I must speak to them.”

“They are not tame beasts, you know.”

“I am not a tame girl.”

Bellenmore stood. “Come here.”

Alma rose from her chair and went to stand before the magician. He reached into the pocket of his robe and drew out a leather bag. “Here,” he said. “Take this for your troubles.”

The bag was very heavy. Alma untied the strings that held it shut and glanced inside.

It was filled with gold and jewels.

She snorted and handed it back to him. “Don’t be silly. That’s not what I came for.”

A corner of his mouth twitched upward in what might have been a smile. “I guess it’s not,” he whispered. He looked at her for a moment longer, and she could tell that he was testing her again, even more than he had with the bag of gold, though she couldn’t tell how.

Finally he sighed. “I have to get something,” he said gruffly. “You stay here.”

After she had nodded her agreement, he crossed to a door at the far side of the room. When he opened it and stepped through he seemed to disappear into a shadowy gloom. Balan started forward, but Alma touched his arm and he resumed his stance behind her chair.

When Bellenmore returned he was holding a golden chain, from which dangled a crystal amulet. Inside the crystal was coiled a long strand of white hair that seemed to glow with a light all its own.

“This amulet was a gift of the queen,” he said. “There are only five such in all the world. It will allow you to pass into the land of the unicorns.”

Alma took it from him. It felt warm in her hand.

The magician leaned forward and in whispered tones told her how to use it. Her eyes grew wide, and just a hint of fear showed in them, but she nodded to show that she understood.

“And what do I do when I get there?” she asked.

“That, my girl,” said the wizard, “is entirely up to you.”

“Come with me,” said Alma.

The old man looked at her in surprise. He started to answer, paused, then shook his head. “This is for you to do,” he said softly. “Alone.”

Balan placed his hand on his sister’s shoulder and glared at Bellenmore.

“She must go alone,” repeated the old wizard.

Grimwold paused and looked at the sky. “I’m taking too long to tell this. They’re going to want me down below soon.”

“You can’t stop now!” cried Ivy. “What happened to Alma?”

“Well she came through, of course. But you know how that goes. You’ve done it yourself.”

“But what *then?*”

Grimwold glanced at the sky again. “Then you and I went back down the cliff,” he said abruptly. “Because it is not a good idea to keep the queen waiting.”

Ivy started to protest again, but he raised his hand. “I have to tell the whole thing down there anyway,” he reminded her. “You’ll hear soon enough.”

She sighed, and turned to follow him back down the path. When she did, she gasped in astonishment. The gathering of unicorns was complete. There must have been a thousand or more waiting in the grotto below. And though the sky was settling into darkness, from their gathered horns came a glow that lit the night, a glory that brought a sharp sting of tears to her eyes.

“They *are* beautiful,” said the old dwarf, and for a moment there was no hint of gruffness in his voice, only love and wonder.

Ivy nodded, unable to speak.

They made their way back down the trail, which was lit by the glory of unicorns, passing near enough to the waterfall on several turns that its spray dampened their clothes.

At the base of the cliff Cloudmane stood waiting for them.

“Let it be me,” she said desperately. “I want to be the next Guardian.”

“You’re mad,” replied Grimwold, brushing past her.

Ivy hesitated. She knew she should follow Grimwold. But the unicorn, whom she had not met before, was clearly in great distress. She stopped, glanced uneasily at the dwarf, who did not look back to see if she was still coming, then put her hand on Cloudmane’s neck. The mane felt like living silk.

“What is it?” she asked softly.

Cloudmane simply shook her head and turned away. Trotting silently back to join the others, she melted into the glory so smoothly that Ivy lost track of her in just seconds.

The girl sighed. Grimwold was far ahead of her now, and she scurried to catch up. Before she had gone ten paces, a pair of tall stallions barred her path.

"Only Grimwold goes on from here," said one of them, gently but firmly. "Other two-legs stand over there."

Ivy started to protest, then remembered it was a privilege to be here at all. She looked after Grimwold and suddenly realized that following him now would be like walking out onto a stage during a play—or rushing up to the pulpit during a church service. She turned in the direction the unicorn had indicated and saw a handful of humans and near-humans (including two elves and a gnome). They were standing beneath a clump of blue trees that were almost like the pine of Earth, yet somehow different, too, of course. She recognized Master Chang, the painter, and old Madame Leonetti; the others were strangers to her.

She went to stand with the group.

The ceremony began.

The queen spoke first, greeting the gathered glory with what was clearly great joy. Yet there was sorrow in her voice as well.

Then came a song that was made not of sound but of light, and which Ivy heard not with her ears but with her heart.

When the song was over a tall stallion walked slowly to the front of the group. He stood for a moment, then trumpeted a call that pierced the night, seeming to split the sky itself. A deep silence—a quiet unlike anything Ivy had ever experienced before—fell over the clearing. Even the voice of the waterfall seemed to have disappeared.

The stallion spoke into that silence in a voice that was no more than a whisper, but that carried to the farthest edges of the glory. "We are here to choose the next Guardian of Memory. It is a position of honor and horror, of strength and sorrow, of glory and grief. He who fills it must be strong and swift, brave of heart and fleet of foot, able to endure not only pain and loss but also the piercing joy of unexpected love that cannot last. To ready your hearts, listen once more to the story of the First Guardian."

Into the silence stepped Grimwold. The old dwarf began to speak, telling them all that he had told Ivy and more, adding details of the unicorns' first

passage to Luster and how it had come to be.

Though Ivy had just heard the story, she hung on every word, drinking it in, trying to understand still more deeply. By the time Grimwold came to the point where he had left off before, she felt as if she were not hearing the story, but living it.

Now (said Grimwold) when Alma Leonetti entered the land of the unicorns, she had—as should be no surprise—adventures strange and wondrous. She was captured by the delvers and held prisoner for three years. In her escape, she saved a young princeling named Moonheart, who was much beloved of his mother, the queen. When the two made it back to the court together, the grateful queen offered Alma a boon.

Alma stood, small and quiet. She looked around at the unicorns. Gathering her breath, and her courage, she said, “Come home.”

A murmur of horror rippled through the glory.

“Come home,” said Alma again, and this time tears were coursing down her cheeks. “Something good is dying without you.” She stepped toward the queen, and touched her, which was a great crime. But the queen did not move away.

Pressing her cheek to the queen’s, burying her face in that mane that felt like spun cloud and smelled of the sea and the forest and something more, something that cannot be named, Alma whispered, “Hearts grow hard and weary. Pain spreads, and joy diminishes. Those who hated you hate you still, but those who loved you, or would have loved you, or wanted to love you but never had the chance are being scraped hollow by a loss they don’t understand. Come home. Please come home. We are withering without you.”

“The world is not kind to us, child,” whispered the queen.

“It is even unkinder without you,” replied Alma fiercely.

Then, her face pressed close to the queen’s ear, the storyteller’s daughter began to sing of all that the unicorns had left behind, the good and the bad, the oceans and the forest, the mountains and the sky. She sang of all that she had seen in her long wandering to find the unicorns. Pulsing through her song was the sorrow she herself had felt with their passing. Beneath that quivered the love of things unseen and mysteries unsolved—of untouched

joy waiting just past the next moment—that had vanished with the passing of the unicorns.

And as Alma sang, the queen remembered all the humans the unicorns had loved over the years, humans who had loved them back with open hearts, humans who had fought and died for them. She remembered, too, the world that had given them birth, a world no more beautiful than Luster, but no less so, either. And she thought of her own son, whom Alma had saved from the delvers, and finally she said, “Peace, girl. Be silent. Here is what I will grant you. From this time forth, there shall always be one unicorn—one and one alone—who lives in the world of our birth. That unicorn will have to be enough, enough to remind you of what was, and what can be. He will live alone, in the high places. He will not be seen often, or by many. But his presence should be enough to keep something alive in you. He will guard the memory of what has passed to this world, and the sight of him will help to keep it alive. Those who know such things will know, and those who understand such things will understand, and it will be, if not enough, then something. Something.”

Then she turned to her son Windfoot and said, “Will you be the first?”

And Windfoot agreed, and so it was, and so it will be. Windfoot returned to the land of the humans for five and twenty years, and when his time was up a glory of unicorns gathered to choose a new Guardian of Memory, who went to take his place. And again it was done, and again, and yet again, for these many centuries, though not all the Guardians of Memory survived their full five and twenty years. For the hunting still goes on, and the world is full of danger.

And now the night for choosing is upon us once more, and that is the tale of its beginning.

His story finished, Grimwold came to stand beside Ivy.

A deep silence filled the grotto.

Into that silence came the voice of the queen, sighing across the glory like wind through clover. “Willing hero, willing victim, child of strength and pain, the chosen one must walk alone in paths of sorrow for the sake of those we have left behind. Who will step forward to try the wheel?”

Silently, about a hundred stallions moved to the front of the glory. Then, to Ivy's surprise, Madame Leonetti stepped forward, too. In her hands was a wreath made of white and yellow flowers that Ivy did not recognize. The old woman held the wreath to her side, at shoulder height. The first of the unicorns came forward, and took it with his horn. He held it for a moment, then—looking both disappointed and relieved—bent his head so that the next unicorn could take it from him.

In this way the wreath passed from one unicorn to another, with no decision being made.

"What are they waiting for?" asked Ivy. "How will they know?"

Grimwold only shook his head and whispered, "Watch!"

From horn to horn passed the wreath, without a sign of change, until only three volunteers remained. Though the queen appeared unworried, Grimwold was beginning to grow fretful.

When the last unicorn took the wreath a cry of astonishment went up. The reason for the cry was not that something had happened, but that it *hadn't.*

No decision had been made. No new guardian had been chosen.

The queen looked toward Madame Leonetti. "What does it mean? Can the magic have failed after all these centuries?"

Madame Leonetti spread her hands. "I really don't—"

She was interrupted by an outburst from among the unicorns. "Let me try!" called Cloudmane, shouldering her way past a pair of stallions considerably taller than herself. "Let me try!"

"This is not for you," said one of the stallions gruffly. "Go back, Cloudmane."

"It's clearly not for you," she replied defiantly. "None of you have been chosen. Will we let our old world wither, then? Shall we give up being Guardians because of your stubborn male pride? Will we leave Night Eyes stranded there forever? *Or will you let me try?"*

"Let her try," whispered the queen.

Madame Leonetti smiled, and extended the wreath.

Moving carefully, Cloudmane thrust her horn through its center.

For a moment the only sound was that of the waterfall. Then there was a crackle of power, and under it a murmur of astonishment from the gathered unicorns. The wreath began to vibrate. Light danced across its surface.

Madame Leonetti dropped her hold on the wreath and stepped back. Suspended in the air, Cloudmane's horn still at its center, the wreath began to spin. The light on its surface grew brighter, spiraling around the green leaves like mist made of fire. The crackle changed to a hum, the hum to a note like a bell. The wreath began to grow, and as it did, it became a window to the other world, the world the unicorns had fled; a window to Earth.

The view was that of a mountaintop.

At its peak stood Night Eyes, son of Manda Seafoam, who for twenty-five years had walked the hills of Earth, a Guardian of the ancient memory of unicorns, a silent, unseen reminder of lost joy and the possibility of healing. He looked toward them, but obviously could not see them, as if his attention had been drawn by the sound, but the door had not yet opened.

Then, with a sudden flash of light, the door did open. The worlds were linked. The homeward path was complete.

Trumpeting his joy, Night Eyes leaped forward, bounding through the circle of light to where the glory of unicorns stood waiting.

But no sooner through than he stopped in shock.

"Cloudmane!" he gasped. "*You* are the next Guardian?"

"Who else?" she asked softly.

"Quickly!" cried Madame Leonetti. "The magic will last but a moment longer."

"But why?" asked Night Eyes, his voice filled with sorrow. "Why, Cloudmane?"

She rested her neck beside his. "I need to know what you know, my beloved. Before I can be your full partner I must walk the hills of Earth, know its people, experience its beauty and terror. Until I do, we cannot truly be together."

"But that does not explain how—"

"No time!" said Madame Leonetti, even more urgently than before. "The door will not stay open much longer. You must go now, Cloudmane. *Now!"*

The opening was shimmering. With a cry, Cloudmane leaped through the glowing cirle, onto the mountaintop where Night Eyes had stood but a moment earlier.

The circle closed with a rush and a snap.

The wreath fell to the ground, no longer green but a brittle, burnt brown.

Earth was gone.

The door was gone.

Cloudmane was gone.

A song rose from the unicorns, a new version of the prayer they always uttered for the Guardian of Memory. “Guide her and guard her, Powers that Be. Love her and watch over her on her journey. Bring her home safe to us.”

Soaring above all the other voices was that of Night Eyes. On the very last word he differed in what he sang, ending with a sob on, “Bring her home safe to *me.”*

For a moment, all stood in silence. Then Night Eyes bowed to the queen.

“I still don’t understand,” he said, his voice husky with loss. “How can this be? I know why she wanted to go. But how could it *happen?”*

The queen shook her head from side to side, the tip of her horn inscribing an arc of light. “I do not know.”

“I do,” said Madame Leonetti. Her voice was frail, and she had to work hard to be heard above the waterfall, which was sounding again. But the shape of the grotto brought her words to even the most distant ears.

“You have forgotten the nature of the magic. The exact wording of the spell as first created called for the Guardian of Memory to be ‘the unicorn with the deepest love for those left behind.’ Clearly, that was Cloudmane.”

The queen shook her head. “Since the beginning of our connection, the deepest ties between human and unicorn have been between the stallions and young maidens. And since the time of the first Guardian, young stallions are taught an understanding of humans, and compassion for them, in preparation for the possibility that they may be chosen to return to Earth. How could Cloudmane have more love for those left behind?”

After a long silence Ivy said, “I think I know.”

The queen turned to her. “Speak, child.”

Ivy glanced around, trying to fight down a surge of panic. So many eyes were gazing at her! Tangling her fingers in her long red hair, she gathered her courage. Finally she spoke.

“When Night Eyes went to be the Guardian, Cloudmane was left behind. That’s why she can love those left behind on Earth. She knows what it’s like, because she’s been left behind herself.”

“As have I,” said Madame Leonetti, moving to place a hand on Night Eyes’ shoulder.

“You were left behind?” he asked.

“Actually, I have both left someone behind, and been left behind by him. His name was Balan, and he was my brother.”

Ivy gasped. “You can’t be—”

The old woman drew back her hood. Her face was lined with deep wrinkles, but in her eyes was something strong and wonderful. “Alma Leonetti? Of course I am. With the blessings of the unicorns, one can live a long time in this place. Not, alas, without growing old. I left Balan behind when I came to Luster to beg the unicorns to return home, and left him even further behind when I chose to come back and live here. And now I have been left behind, too, because my brother is long dead, as are all the humans I knew when I was your age. It’s been a rich life, child. But it is lonely. To leave. To be left. It’s lonely, but it’s what we do.”

Ivy moved to stand beside the old woman. Alma Leonetti wrapped one arm around the girl’s shoulder, the other around Night Eyes’s neck. Together they looked toward the spark that still hung, flickering and fading, in the sky where Cloudmane had disappeared.

A reminder of a reminder, it burned its way into their hearts, even as it vanished. . . .

Ragged John

Tattered clothes all fluttering,
Worn out voice still muttering,
Ragged John comes knocking
At all the doors in town.

And when a door swings open
Then you can hear the hope in
The thin, cracked voice that wonders
If you've seen his unicorn.

And we all know John is crazy
And his mind has gone all hazy
And the only thing we really wish
Is that he just would let us be.

But John he keeps on questing
And the poor man knows no resting
For there's something hurt within him.
And the pain won't go away.

I've heard when John was younger
He was taken with a hunger
To see the white-horned wonder
They call the unicorn.

But when that star-horned, moon-maned dancer
Finally called, John could not answer;

Fear held him like a prisoner,
And he watched it walk away.

So now empty-eyed John hobbles
Across the village cobbles
And the only fear he feels is
That it will never come again.

Oh, when I watch old Ragged John
Go staggering by and wandering on,
I know there’s nothing sadder
Than a heart that feared its dreams.

If a unicorn should call to you
Some moon-mad night all washed in dew,
Then here’s the prayer to whisper:
“Grant me the heart to follow.”